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1999 Session Report

A True Education Budget

Fellow 36th District Rep. Helen Sommers has put together a great proposal for a new state budget that would dramatically improve education at all levels, from pre-school to graduate school.

The new proposal would also allow 10,000 children to have affordable health insurance (*see inside*). Senior citizens and the disabled would receive high quality home-care services. Long-overdue park repairs would be made, and major investments would help with the survival of Washington's wild salmon.

All this and more is achieved while holding state spending growth to its lowest level in more than two decades. But what impresses me most is the strong emphasis on improving education.

Most importantly, the proposal offers fair and decent salaries for teachers, who are the heart of good schools. Compensation for beginning teachers would rise 12.2 percent. *All* teachers would see their incomes boosted at least 7 percent. With Seattle teachers having lost 15 percent of their salaries' buying power to inflation over the past six years, these raises are needed to keep quality teachers in our local classrooms.

Other key investments would help students to reach higher academic standards. For example, more school doors would stay open on Saturdays and in summer to help struggling kids catch up, and support for school safety would be substantially increased. I also welcome the commitment to enroll 8,000 more students in our colleges and universities, and added financial aid to help middle-class families afford these opportunities (*see inside story*).

All in all, the new budget proposal does a fine job of living up to our public responsibilities while living within our means. Please give me a call if you'd like more detailed information.



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Affordable Health Insurance for Kids

I recently heard a true story about two children. To protect their families' privacy, I'll call them Jeff and Jill. When Jeff gets sick, he sees a doctor right away, because his dad's employer provides good family health benefits. Jill's father works for a nursery that pays \$31,000 a year, but no health benefits, and dad can't afford good insurance for the whole family.

Sadly, when a first-grade teacher suspected Jill wasn't learning at her potential, a health exam found that untreated ear infections had caused Jill to permanently lose hearing in one ear. This is the kind of tragedy the federal Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) could have prevented. Unfortunately, we are the only state in the nation that fails to enroll children in this program.



We can make sure that fully **10,000 children** in Washington won't suffer from a lack of health insurance, as Jill did, because CHIP allows parents to buy good health insurance for only \$25 per month per child. These are kids in families who aren't poor enough to qualify for Medicaid, but aren't rich enough to afford the high costs of private insurance.

Insuring these 10,000 kids would cost Washington only \$4 million, as federal dollars would pay fully two-thirds of the costs. In other words, for \$4 million, we can buy \$12 million of health insurance for 10,000 children. Better still, the federal funds come from tobacco taxes Washingtonians have already paid! If we don't use this money, it all goes to other states.

The state budget I'm supporting would end the shame of being the only state to refuse this help with insuring 10,000 children. The other proposal offers \$2 million to insure only 900 children. What should it be? \$2 million to insure 900 kids, or \$4 million to insure 10,000 kids. I've made my choice, and I'm certain it's the right choice for children.

Keeping the Promise of College

Every student who achieves academic excellence through hard work deserves a fair chance to fulfill college dreams. But more and more middle-class families are discovering that their incomes are too high to qualify for financial aid, but not high enough to afford the college opportunities their children deserve.

An exciting new idea called "Promise Scholarships" would open college doors to these families by awarding \$3,000 scholarships to the top 15 percent of graduates from every high school. The awards could be used for tuition at any college or university in our state. Unlike Need Grants, these awards would go to



The proposed Democratic budget would help more kids from middle-class families to enroll at the University of Washington and other colleges.

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talented students in middle-class and working-class families with incomes of up to \$69,000 a year for a family of four. Importantly, they would *not* displace current Need Grants for low-income families.

The \$10 million reserved for Promise Scholarships in the Democratic budget proposal is not yet a sure thing. But it is a high priority for Governor Locke as well as for me and many others, so I believe we will succeed. We all want the best for Washington's next generation. Helping top students and their families to afford college will help us achieve our hopes as well as theirs.

Parents, Kids and Video-game Violence

Thousands of studies prove that overexposure to television violence harms children. We are now beginning to see evidence of ultra-violent video games harming children, especially young children. In fact, some game producers are implanting exactly the wrong messages about violence and killing in children, with advertising slogans such as:

- "Psychiatrists say it's important to feel something when you kill."
- "As easy as killing babies with axes."
- "More fun than shooting your neighbor's cat."
- "Kill your friends guilt-free."

One bondage "game" even advertises in a magazine *read by kids*: "Beat me, whip me, just don't hit that Quit button!" I say it's time to help parents hit the quit button on easy access to ultra-violent video games by young children.



*From an actual video-game advertisement
in a magazine read by kids.*

Let me be clear: The only kind of censorship I support is parental censorship. But parents need good information and tools to protect their kids against some very toxic material. Help may be on the way. At my urging, the Democratic budget proposal includes \$125,000 for research on how best to help parents who are making choices about appropriate games for their children.

Our effort is already having a positive effect. Local newspaper and television coverage led many parents to ask good questions about the dangers of ultra-violent video games, and the Washington Software Alliance and retail associations have pledged their cooperation. My thanks go out to Mothers Against Violence In America, the *Seattle Times*, and many others who have helped to shine the light on this important issue.

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Saving the Kalakala

The beautiful ferry Kalakala has been rescued from Alaskan mud and returned home to the Puget Sound. Dedicated volunteers are now working to restore her former glory, so that an important part of our local history will be part of our future as well.

I'm pleased I was able to secure \$250,000 of state help for the Kalakala's



restoration in the House of Representatives' capital budget. While there's still no guarantee the funds will be in the budget the Governor signs, the bipartisan support is very encouraging. Much of the restoration funding, I should add, must come from private donations. To learn more, call the Kalakala Foundation's toll-free information line at 1-888-823-1935, or visit their colorful Internet site at www.kalakala.org.

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